

Committee Statements

Norton's Committee Statements

Transportation and Infrastructure Committee Markup of the D.C. Real Property Act (Land Transfer)

December 7, 2005-- Thank you, Chairman Young for so quickly bringing this important bill forward, the Federal and District of Columbia Government Real Property Act of 2005, sponsored by Government Reform Committee Chairman Tom Davis and me. The largest parcel is owned by GSA and, therefore, this committee has jurisdiction. I also thank the Bush administration, particularly OMB Director Josh Bolton and his staff, who initiated the effort that resulted in today's bill to respond partially to the District's federally imposed structural deficit. I very much appreciate that the manager's amendment includes my amendment. It is entirely consistent with federal and D.C. law and policy in requiring that in developing these sites, training and workforce programs be used that improve the skills of the city's youth and that solicitation and evaluation of development proposals reach out to disadvantaged businesses. The District is not often able to undertake economic development of the magnitude contemplated here. The District faces the painful anomaly of increases in jobs and in unemployment. Many job and training opportunities will be created when the land is developed. My amendment simply requires that the city maximize this rare and important opportunity by including the development of the city's human capital as a necessary ingredient.

The District has had full and unimpeded use of most of this land for 150 years or more, most of the city's existence, particularly of the only two large sites, Poplar Point, which is parkland, 70% of which must be maintained perpetually for park purposes and wetlands and the largest parcel, Reservation 13, owned by the GSA, which has long been encumbered with District of Columbia agencies, among them, the old D.C. General Hospital, the D.C. Jail, the Addiction Prevention and Recovery Administration Detoxification Center, and D.C. Court Service and Offender Supervision Agency. With the closure of the Hospital, most of this large valuable property has been without productive use for either the city or the federal government.

Our bill not only allows beneficial use of land on the Anacostia Waterfront, where the city already is undertaking major development on its own land. The bill relieves the federal government of the cost of maintenance of parcels it will never use. Perhaps the most important benefit to the federal government, however, is the transfer to government by the District of certain buildings owned by the District on the west campus of St. Elizabeth's, a large site otherwise federally owned, fully clearing a major property needed for federal agencies, where the new Coast Guard headquarters is already scheduled to be constructed.

The Park Service, GSA, and the District support this legislation. Each entity recognizes the benefits of this "swap" opportunity and appreciates that these properties will enrich their respective real estate portfolios. The swap and the use of the land to partially compensate the District for the federally imposed structural deficit were necessary steps to assure payment for the land and consistency with the Federal Property Act and other statutes and federal policy concerning federal land transfers. This bill also has the specific and urgent purpose to compensate the District for some of the costs responsible for a federally imposed structural imbalance. The GAO reported that the structural imbalance results from the federal removal from the tax rolls of more than 40% of the District's land for federal and other purposes; uncompensated services provided by the District to 200,000 federal employees; a federal ban on taxation of commuters, although most travel from the suburbs to federal jobs here; and the District's responsibility for several state costs, although the city is not a state and lacks the broad tax base of a state. This bill provides partial in-kind compensation for the federally imposed structural imbalance documented in a 2004 GAO report to be "between \$470 million and up to more than \$1.1 billion."

Achieving maximum use of available sites located in the nation's capital, where the federal government owns and occupies the most valuable land, is essential to maintaining the financial stability of the District of Columbia. In the face of the costs to the District for covering the federally imposed structural deficit, we appreciate that the Bush administration has taken steps through this bill to begin to face this serious burden placed on the city entirely by federal mandates.

The bill follows the example of the committee's groundbreaking Southeast Federal Center Public-Private Development Act of 2000 authorizing the development of 57 prime acres of federal land now transforming a major section of Southeast Washington that will yield revenue producing changes that benefit both the federal government and the District of Columbia. However, the federal property in today's bill was not owned by the District and therefore to maximize the economic development potential, this bill was necessary in this case.

I support the manager's amendment which includes my provisions regarding job training, and minority equity participation.

Thank you again, Chairman Young and Ranking Member Oberstar for your support of this legislation.

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Transportation and Infrastructure Committee Markup of the Gulf Coast Recovery Act

December 7, 2005-- This bill arises from three days of post-Katrina hearings that Chairman Bill Shuster called when we heard testimony from the Mayor of New Orleans, the Governor of Louisiana, FEMA and scores of Members of Congress, state and local emergency managers, community leaders and many others on what are some of the most pressing issues regarding the recovery that needed immediate attention. In keeping with the budget crisis here in Congress, the Chairman has shaved the bill to the bare basics that I believe Congress cannot in good faith adjourn without passing. The more we learned about the effects of the damage to the Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama economies and well being of the nation, the less this bill looks like legislation for three states—with oil prices set to drive the American economy off the cliff, this bill, for starters, is about the 25 percent of the nation's oil production provided by the Gulf. Many of the provisions in this bill are unusual because Katrina is easily the most costly national disaster in our history. In Louisiana, for example, the federal government has quickly become the source of last resort because New Orleans, the state's greatest source of revenue—one-third of Louisiana's economy,—has lost its tax base and its population. Thus, this bill contains some unprecedented provisions to meet this unprecedented crisis in our country leaving in mind that Congress will soon adjourn for weeks.

Mayor Nagin testified before our Subcommittee that several days before he came to Washington, DC, he had to lay off approximately 50 percent of his workforce and more have followed. The bill realistically acknowledges that the recovery process for the Gulf Coast Region will be long term and that many workers will be displaced for a long period of time. This is why the bill extends the eligible period of disaster unemployment assistance from 26 weeks to 52 weeks for the date of disaster declaration made from Hurricane Katrina and Rita and raises the amount available to at least 50 percent the national average. The bill also allows the President to assist financially distressed state and local governments by paying for base pay and overtime expenses for personnel that are essential to the response and recovery of the Gulf region for a six month period of time. Similarly, because many localities have no revenue coming in, they cannot meet the cost share requirement for many federal programs. The bill amends the Community Disaster Loan Act of 2005 to allow local governments to receive loans up to 50 percent of the local government's budget. It sets the cost share of debris removal for disaster declaration resulting from Hurricane Katrina or Rita to 100 percent for the period of declaration. It sets the federal cost share of the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) at 100 percent for a one year period for disaster declarations for Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. To encourage the widespread use of cost-effective mitigation measures during the recovery, the bill allows states and localities to access the money right now as communities are currently rebuilding. As communities rebuild, we cannot afford to miss this opportunity to mitigate against future damage because of their inability to cover the non-federal cost share. I am particularly gratified that the bill restores the percentage used to calculate the availability of HMGP funds following a disaster from 7.5 percent back to 15 percent. Under the Disaster Mitigation Amendments of 2000, the percentage allowed was 15 percent, with an additional 5 percent allowed for states with an approved mitigation plan in effect at the time of the disaster. In 2002, despite the objections raised by this Committee, by the Emergency Management Community and by state and local government officials, the Omnibus Appropriations bill changed the percentage to 7.5 percent. This bill reasserts our Committee jurisdiction over emergency management issues and restores the level to 15 percent. With the recent floor passage of the Predisaster Mitigation Program and with these improvements to the HMGP program, we once again are on the path to having a well balanced mitigation program.

A particularly welcome amendment is the amendment to the Stafford Act to create a new program for state and local governments to improve interoperability and survivability of emergency communications systems. After September 11, there was a good deal of effort made to improve interoperability. Some progress has been made but many problems continue to persist and we saw interoperability fail tragically during Katrina. We heard testimony about many other issues concerning the long term recovery of the Gulf Region, including housing. Along with Chairman Young, Ranking Member Oberstar and Chairman Shuster, I am an original co-sponsor of a bill to make FEMA once again the independent nimble cabinet level agency it once was with a provision concerning the qualifications of the Director. I understand the need to speed this bill to the floor, but I hope we will soon consider this and other necessary reforms of FEMA.

Mr. Chairman, I support the bill and urge my colleagues to do the same.